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## **Assembling a Revolution**

### **Graffiti, Cairo and the Arab Spring**

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In 2011, shortly after the euphoria of Hosni Mubarak's ousting from the Egyptian presidency had diminished with the Supreme Council of the Military Forces' (SCAF) constriction of the democratic process, graffiti writers offered their pointed commentary on the state of Egypt, painting walls throughout Cairo. Perhaps the most infamous of street artists in Egypt, Mohammad Fahmy, aka Ganzeer, put up a large graffito on a wall under the 6th of October Bridge in the Zamalek neighborhood of the nation's capital (Figure 1). The image is arresting: a young man on a bicycle carrying on his head an enormously large tray of aysh, a type of Egyptian bread, faces a military tank with its turret pointed directly at him. This political piece emphasises the divide between the youth movement that helped deliver the city from Mubarak's rule and the generals who subsequently consolidated power; the youth, and the city they occupied, are in danger of being destroyed. With echoes of the man who stood in front of tanks in Tiananmen Square on 5 June 1989, the solitary bicyclist holds the nourishment for the larger, collective resistance that had helped overthrow a dictator, and continued its active protest against the ruling military forces. A few hours after Ganzeer finished the piece, though, another prolific graffiti artist (and friend), Sad Panda, placed his iconic



Figure 1: Ganzeer, *Tank vs. Bike* and Sad Panda, 2011

Photo: Mehri Khalili <[http://www.flickr.com/photos/revers\\_org\\_pl/6147310875/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/revers_org_pl/6147310875/)>

namesake on the wall behind the bicyclist. The slouching and portly panda, more cuddly than fierce, becomes a witness to the standoff being portrayed on the wall. The addition of the iconic panda speaks to the absurdity of the violence being directed against the bicyclist, humorously underlining that resistance—a deadly proposition—will take on many forms, including seemingly innocuous ones.

The graffiti was left relatively untouched (although often visited and photographed) until January 2012 when unknown artists added more images to the piece. Faceless, mask-wearing protesters now joined Sad Panda, together witnessing disturbing images of violence: victims, graphically crushed to death, gushed torrents of blood under and around the tank's wheels (Figure 2). This addition, a reference to



Figure 2: *Tank vs. Bike*, January 2012

Photo by Mosa'ab Elshamy

<<http://www.flickr.com/photos/mosaaberising/6666259063/sizes/o/in/photostream/>>

the death of Coptic Christians run over by military tanks on 9 October 2011, visually shows the possible consequence of standing up to those in power. But in a wall battle that would mirror what was happening in the larger political activities of Cairo and Egypt, the piece was again altered in February 2012 and the conversation, now an argument, continued. SCAF loyalists identifying themselves as members of the Badr Team 1, destroyed the piece, whitewashing the protesters, the bloody crushed victims, the bicyclist and Sad Panda. The only object that remained was the tank and the added inscription, 'The Army and the Police and the People Are One Hand'.<sup>1</sup> Members of the Badr Team 1 posted a You-Tube video of the defacement, which called on other Egyptian youth to erase 'anarchist imagery' from their city's walls. In retaliation, a group playfully calling themselves the Mona Lisa Battalion drew a Dadaist-inspired flower with military leaders on its petals, various murals of iconic figures as well as an obscene snake-like general devouring a fresh kill (Figure 3). The absurdist, dark humour returned to the piece and the wall battle continued.

This narrative of the transformation of *Tank vs Bike* speaks to the fluid nature of graffiti. For writers in Cairo, graffiti was one of many resistances that led to the abnegation of the presidency by Hosni Mubarak and the continued protests against SCAF. Ordinary surfaces of the city were illegally marked, displaying revolutionary potentiality by allowing rhetorical openings of engagement to the seemingly powerless. Far from being a monolithic discourse, graffiti created geographies of



Figure 3: *Tank vs Bike*, February 2012

Photo: Soraya Morayef <<http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2012/02/06/war-on-graffiti-scaf-vandalists-versus-graffiti-artists/>>

protest that were locally enacted but globally contextualised. This ephemeral discourse needed to stay relevant and constantly reinvent itself, responding to particular conversations on specific walls throughout Cairo. Graffiti is part of the revolutionary conversation that exerts opinions; it is a tangible display of the political complexity embodied by those inhabiting the streets. Saskia Sassen, in an article discussing the Middle East uprisings, imagines a newly birthed 'global street' that has become a home for the powerless: 'urban space makes their powerlessness complex, and in that complexity lies the possibility of making the political, making the civic'.<sup>2</sup> For Sassen, the conceptual nature of the term allows for a linkage between the many different types of protest that exploded throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, theoretically connecting them while acknowledging their varied, specific and separate political projects. As she makes clear, powerlessness is not an absolute condition, and these resistive expressions—converging on a city square, writing on its walls—help form a fluid civic community that is materially based in particular city streets but conceptually linked to other streets throughout the region and the world.

The use of graffiti as a resistive practice during the street protests in Cairo is not unique to the Egyptian revolution; in most political uprisings, walls are covered with messages.<sup>3</sup> During the Arab Spring, graffiti was ever present in the streets of Tunisia and a large amount of Arabic writing was found spraypainted on the drainpipes in Sirte, Libya, where Muammar Gaddafi hid before he was killed.<sup>4</sup> But just as each uprising in the Arab Spring is idiosyncratic to each country, so, too, is the graffiti unique to that particular place. Cairo's walls, as the above wall battle attests, are complicated sites of violence as graffiti writers with differing political messages, both in content and tone, take to the same streets. The circulation of knowledge that graffiti represents in Cairo transforms physical space into contested sites as the walls' declarations reflect the larger political discussions of the day. A city landscape, as the sociologists Kim Dovey, Simon Wolley and Ian Woodcock report, is a 'dynamic assemblage of connections, of which the desire to write and erase graffiti are part'<sup>5</sup> and as Cairo uncomfortably settles into a post-Mubarak Egypt, who writes, how they write and what will be left on the walls becomes a constant battle of desires to produce and erase a particular set of knowledges. While the thousands of bodies crammed together in Tahrir Square purports a unified

message, when we examine the graffiti left behind we can see nuances of thought. By reading these utterances, we soon discover the heterogeneity of the messages being proclaimed and the contradictory ways these messages are framed.

This article, however, is not an attempt to tease out these various religious, social, gendered and economic arguments that were, in various degrees, presented during the demonstrations and its aftermath—a rich subject of much debate and ongoing scholarship. Instead, my focus is on Cairo graffiti and particular ways revolutionary desire is articulated and interpreted through this medium. This passionate, though amorphous, desire is neither dogmatic nor uniform. During the protests, secular feminists were protesting against Mubarak in the same square as members of the Muslim Brotherhood; they occupied the same space even though their individual political motivations and larger national goals were intensely divergent. Likewise, the graffiti found on Cairo's walls, doors, streets, tanks, lamp posts, cars and statues do not have an institutionalised message. Graffiti allows for anyone with paint or marker to place their desires on the walls. When examining Cairo's graffiti, then, I am not framing it in terms of specific political parties or platforms but rather, in the spirit of Jeff Ferrell's understanding of illegal urban writing, I view the underlying politics of graffiti as a strand of anarchism.<sup>6</sup> Graffiti is unsanctioned and unregulated and, due to its illegality, it has a spontaneous, rupturing quality. I am not concerned with the way these ruptures are filled in and smoothed over by hierarchal political parties attempting to unite Egyptian citizens under a particular ideological banner; rather, I am interested in pausing in front of the graffiti and examining it as a tool that helped create the rupture in the first place.<sup>7</sup> While the graffiti scene has evolved greatly after Mohamed Morsi was elected president on 30 June 2012, and even more so after he was deposed by the army on 3 July 2013, I will specifically examine the graffiti during the 18-day protest in 2011 and the months following Mubarak's ouster and the reign of the SCAF-controlled government.

This article has evolved from a project where I interviewed graffiti writers from around the world, including Egypt. From these interviews, other contacts with Egyptian, urban-based writers formed. At the same time, while using Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and other social media sites, I was able to connect with other writers and follow—from a distance—various manifestations of the graffiti scene as

it evolved in Cairo and Alexandria. Graffiti has expanded exponentially from a youth subculture practiced by a small minority to writing and artistic acts that cross generational and gendered boundaries.<sup>8</sup> Graffiti viewership has also greatly increased as Egypt's graffiti has become ubiquitous as a visual lexicon of protest in newspaper and journal articles about the uprising. Social media in particular has allowed it to travel quickly from a particular wall to a global audience. This has not gone unnoticed and many graffiti practitioners in Egypt are like Wael Ghonim, the young Google executive who expertly used social media to mobilise protesters: they are aware of the outside audiences watching from all areas of the globe and both influence and are influenced by this viewership.<sup>9</sup>

Graffiti is a material expression of desire placed in the public sphere, but it is ephemeral. Most of the images in this article have disappeared, covered over by government employees, or, as Mona Abaza, a professor of sociology who has chronicled the evolving graffiti scene around the American University in Cairo, has termed them 'professional whiteners'.<sup>10</sup> This article analytically removes the white paint, exploring some of the mutations of graffiti, contextualising and assembling a graffiti scene in Cairo as it follows the ebbs and flows of revolutionary desire while also examining the ways that this graffiti is read from a global perspective.

#### —CONTEXTUALISING CAIRO GRAFFITI

By many accounts, Egypt, with over eighty million people, is considered the Arab world's cultural, political and military leader. Over the course of eighteen days, from 25 January until 11 February 2011, six million of those Egyptians took to the street, creating the biggest pro-democracy uprising in the history of the Arab world.<sup>11</sup> The epicenter of Egypt's uprising was Tahrir Square. The graffiti on the square's walls, and on the streets leading to it, reflected this surge of protest. This culturally central landmark is home to the Museum of Antiquities, the offices of the Arab league and the state-run television offices of the ruling National Party. As he desperately tried to hold onto power, Mubarak, who had ruled the country longer than all but three pharaohs and pashas in its six thousand-year history, was faced with globally cognisant, mobile youths who placed their bodies in opposition to the president in this square that contains elements of Egypt's rich history and its present media apparatus. These desperate men and women (where 40 per cent of the population

live on less than two dollars a day and 25 per cent is aged between eighteen and thirty years old) were willing to risk their lives as they rushed into Tahrir Square, where many captured their immediate experiences, filming themselves on their smart phones and uploading them to a variety of social media sites.<sup>12</sup> The ubiquitous panoramic images of the protest shot from a long distance show the protesters as a collective, but on Facebook pages or Twitter accounts of individuals, unique stories of personal revolt began to emerge.

Graffiti was one method used to fight Mubarak. During the 18 days, there were numerous harsh skirmishes and the victories (and defeats) were almost immediately territorialised through graffiti. For example, when one particularly fierce battle on Qasr al-Nil Bridge was won by the protesters early during the occupation, the pedestal of the famous stone lions was immediately spray-painted with graffiti reading 'Game Over, Mubarak'.<sup>13</sup> Graffiti, according to urban studies scholar Ella Chmielewska, can be read as a 'specific history of protest, contestation and subversion framed by the locality'.<sup>14</sup> This particular graffito is framed by the usurped bridge leading to Tahrir Square, proclaiming this rhetorical sentiment as a statement of fact. Graffiti forms a fluid geography of resistance during transformative times, and there is a direct materialist connection between writing on walls and inhabiting streets in protest.

If, as archeologists Bruno David and Meredith Wilson suggest, and the above example illustrates, graffiti is a way of asserting one's right to place and self-determination,<sup>15</sup> the occupying of the streets and writing on its walls are certainly intertwined. These public spaces that contained the blood of the protesters were often times the same spaces that were painted with the likenesses of those who had died, giving a physical shape to the memory of the victims of violence. Cairo graffiti, to use Jean Baudrillard's classic definition of the term, was a 'scream, an interjection ... an insurrection and eruption in the urban landscape'.<sup>16</sup> An interruption, therefore, in the life of a city, where streets stopped functioning as they were designed to and instead became place holders of bodies—with the walls holding the visual lexis of their demands.

The interrelationship between occupying walls with graffiti and occupying Tahrir Square with bodies has a political lineage that predates the Arab Spring. Cairo's downtown area was built between 1863 and 1879 by Khedive Ismail as part

of an ambitious city planning initiative that contained broad boulevards and public squares—perfect for large masses of people to gather. The most spectacular of these squares, called Midan Ismailia, had its name changed to Midan al Tahrir (Liberation Square) after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, when Egypt moved from being a constitutional monarchy to a republic. In recent history, this public space has been the scene of various youth protests and demonstrations, including the 1972 student-led democracy movement and the 2006 two-day sit-in by activists and bloggers who wrote their political demands on the walls and streets.<sup>17</sup> Both occupying streets and writing on walls are cultural forms of production as a means of resistance that are materially located in a specific time and place. The graffiti, like the bodies, were interjections into everyday life that insisted on being read. And it was certainly read by the ruling party; the graffiti was erased and the bodies were forcibly removed from Tahrir Square. New laws were written, CCTV surveillance of public space was installed and new strategies to control protests were implemented.

Despite the strategies developed to control the protest and its accompanying rhetoric, graffiti is a disembodied act that secretly forces itself onto city life: the unauthorised words on the walls accuse while the accusers are tactically nowhere to be seen. When the city is in flux, graffiti, like the bodies in the street, is a material re-appropriation of public space. This occupying of space counteracts the strategies of surveillance and erasure. In turn, as the criminologists Mark Halsey and Ben Perderick state, writing on walls ‘disturbs, deterritorializes and therefore rejuvenates the city’<sup>18</sup> creating a social, dialectic relationship between the city and its citizens with graffiti writers helping reconstitute the visual terrain for other city inhabitants. Graffiti, therefore, produces for the viewer a new relationship with the city. This relationship that takes place spatially within the city is also globally informed.

During the occupation of Tahrir Square, ‘The End’ was painted in English in large black letters on a side of a truck, scrawled over Arabic words ‘Down with Mubarak’ (Figure 4). The palimpsest of Arabic and English speaks to a larger audience than the one present in Tahrir Square; it is a rhetoric of protest meant for dispersion past the city walls. In the upper right of the photo, one can pick out an advertisement for air travel. Although certainly captured in the photo accidentally, it is a visual reminder that city space is at once a physical location as well as a global





Figure 4: 'The End' spray-painted over the Arabic 'Down with Mubarak' (trans. Yasmine El Rashidi)  
 Photo: Yasmine El Rashidi <<http://www.nybooks.com/books/imprints/collections/the-battle-for-egypt/>>

entity: images of conflict graffiti are transported at the speed of a Twitter post and can be easily seen by clicking on Al Jazeera or Flickr. For example, Iman Mersel, an Egyptian-born poet who was living in Canada at the time, wanted to feel the spirit of the revolution. Instead of reading traditional newspapers, she searched for images of her home on the internet, seeking out the graffiti covered walls. For her, this was the loci of the uprising: 'from the early days of revolution onwards, the walls became us'.<sup>19</sup> Even from a distance of thousands of miles and with an ocean between, for Mersel, the graffiti-covered walls became the conduit to experience the revolution.

The graffiti mentioned above is indicative of the global street described earlier by Sassen: the powerless emerge participating in civic action that is witnessed by a global audience. The graffiti painted on the truck, Ganzeer's piece under the 6th of October Bridge and the declarative statements triumphantly written on Qasr al-Nil Bridge's stone lions are part of a visual narrative revealing the social construction of a city that is in a moment of upheaval. Just as bullets and blood become part of the materiality of the walls during conflict, changing those walls and infusing them with a new ideological identity and physical form, political graffiti transforms the essential structures of a city, reconstituting the architecture to create for viewers a subjective perceptual relationship with the environment. The walls speak and enter

into a collective conversation expressing plural identities and revolutionary desires of the people inhabiting the streets. This conversation—partially overheard, sometimes (mis)translated, often contradictorily interpreted—is joined by people from all areas of the world.

A helpful way to think about Cairo graffiti during these months of transition is to apply the Deleuzian concept of ‘assemblage’. An assemblage is the relationship among a collection of heterogeneous elements that express a particular character or essence. Assemblages cannot be discovered by exclusively examining the individual components; only after it is understood what it can do, do we know what it is.<sup>20</sup> As Chimelewska states, ‘graffiti is an important cultural site for negotiating local identity’,<sup>21</sup> and the individual graffiti that filled Cairo’s walls each contained the separate message of a particular writer placing her or his revolutionary desires on the wall. But there is still linkage as the eye—and mind—connects the graffiti together. Reading practices of graffiti are not isolated and the eye moving from one graffito to the other allows for an assemblage: the character or essence of the protest gets made, or, is in the process of ‘becoming’. In this way, reading graffiti creates a ‘territory’, a controlling of a place that is not fixed but is constantly being made and unmade, reterritorialised and deterritorialised.<sup>22</sup>

To assemble a fluid territory of revolutionary graffiti and thus articulate a more robust geography of revolutionary graffiti, in the remainder of this article I highlight a few such nuanced individual components found on Cairo’s walls during the transitional months from pre-Mubarak to post-Mubarak Egypt. Stopping in front of particular graffito allows for discussion of specific walls and streets; examining the individual graffito in relation to each other enables extended assemblage of revolutionary graffiti in Cairo’s historic transitional moment.

#### —MAHMOUD ALY AND AYMEN: READING GRAFFITI IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Nineteen-year-old Mahmoud Aly, a writer in pre- and post- Mubarak Egypt, is a self-identified graffiti artist who lives, works and attends university in Alexandria. Mahmoud became interested in graffiti at sixteen. Not knowing any writers in Alexandria, he was first influenced by US and other Western writers, including cope2 and can2;<sup>23</sup> he learned about graffiti by watching videos and balancing an understanding of the global history of graffiti with tutorials on how to make it. This



Figure 5: Mahmoud Aly, signature graffiti

Photo: Courtesy Mahmoud Aly

influence can be seen in his 'Wild Style'-like signature graffiti, with its fat bubble letters and arrows exploding into different directions (Figure 5).

He has been writing graffiti since 2008 and vehemently disagrees with people who state that there was not a graffiti scene pre-revolution:

Of course there was a big graffiti scene but there wasn't that mass media focus on the artistic pieces and if it was a political message the government will block it the next day, that's why lots of people think there wasn't any graffiti scene in Egypt before the revolution.<sup>24</sup>

While developing his graffiti style, Mahmoud also wrote explicit political graffiti which for him is the 'strongest revolutionary art' and the one that 'is closest to the people'. Revolution is an aesthetic experience that unites people and translates from images on the wall to people in the street. But for him, there is no distinction between his fat signature graffiti and his more overt political pieces—they are all expressions of his aesthetic sensibilities.

On examination, Mahmoud's graffiti are certainly part of the Egyptian urban geography but, as Jeff Ferrell and Robert Weide suggest about contemporary writing, they are 'beyond and between cities as much as within them'.<sup>25</sup> Mahmoud learned graffiti style and history from writers he met online and the countless 'black-book' web pages easily found on the internet, before practicing his own art in Alexandria and Cairo. The specific local walls, therefore, acquired a global dialect as

he tagged them. Mahmoud views his writing as art and believes in its capabilities as Joe Austin does when he states, 'Graffiti art provided (and still provides) a way of seeing something new; an-other visual order is possible and so an-other city is possible and so an-other life is possible as well.'<sup>26</sup> As part of a global graffiti youth subculture, Mahmoud Aly learned to write from virtually examining the walls of New York, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, forming online friendships with graffiti writers from around the world who were encouraging him to identify and think of himself as a graffiti writer. When the demonstrations in Cairo began, he joined them, in person, standing with others in Tahrir Square and also disembodied, through his name and messages marked on the walls. Mahmoud's desire to write graffiti did not suddenly appear; it was a logical extension of the graffiti scene of which he had already been a part.

As Mahmoud's graffiti attests, the line between 'political' and 'nonpolitical' writing is certainly ambiguous and, in my view, irrelevant. The following example illustrates this point. Yasmine El Rashidi, a journalist living in Cairo who has published a collection of essays on the Egyptian revolution, writes about her friend Ayman, a graffiti writer who stencilled a sweeper on the streets and walls of Cairo in 2009 (Figure 6). The sweeper is a poignant symbol. Towards the end of Mubarak's rule, Cairo was an overpopulated city with approximately seventeen million living in the greater metropolitan area. The trash-filled streets evident throughout the city also symbolised the corruption seen as the root of insufficient governmental public services.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 6: Ayman Ramadan, *Sweeper*

Photo: Ayman Ramadan <<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-09-27-elrashidi-en.html>>

Ayman was caught and arrested for his vandalism and was repeatedly interrogated over the course of two days. The police attempted to concretely link Ayman to anti-Mubarak movements through his graffiti. The graffiti, though, was not explicitly political—there were no overt messages of regime change, no obscene images of Mubarak; there was only a sweeper spray painted on a wall. The image's ambiguity allowed Ayman to be released; the police did not know if he was a threat to the regime or not. Nine months later, Ayman was again on the streets during the Tahrir Square demonstrations. 'We're free now ... We can do whatever we want', he stated while taking a picture of a graffiti that said, 'Fuck the Police'.<sup>28</sup> Reading these two pieces of graffiti in dialogue with each other, it is apparent that both are politically motivated writings that express concerns about city life, albeit the first, created pre-revolution, in a more muted way than the second, created during the demonstrations. But before the revolution, the police did not view all graffiti as revolutionary tools and as long as it was not explicitly anti-Mubarak, writers were usually let go. Bodies in the street were read as dangerous, but graffiti on the walls were (mostly) ignored. Both Ayman's street sweeper and Mahmoud's wild style graffiti were political (in that changing the visual dynamics of a city is always ideologically motivated), and point to a new city, a new life that has global accents. Both writers, though, fluidly adopted more overtly political graffiti texts when the eighteen days of protest erupted in Tahrir Square. Although it may be simpler to separate graffiti into political and non-political demarcations depending on a style of writing (piece vs tag) or a particular moment in history (pre-revolution vs. post-revolution), it behooves us to panoramically assemble our understanding of graffiti. Political graffiti, like the overall protests of the Arab Spring, emerged in large numbers at particular moments, but its numerous roots spread distinctly into the past.

Scholars have effectively argued that describing the recent events in the Middle East as an Arab 'awakening' is an insulting misnomer, pointing to numerous democracy movements in the region since the nineteenth century. Similarly, Ahmed Nagi argues that while there has been a focus on graffiti post-Arab Spring, there was a pre-revolution graffiti scene that flourished in Cairo, Alexandria and other large Egyptian cities despite attempts by authorities to stop illegal politicised writing.<sup>29</sup> But graffiti is not just a present era phenomena, it is part of the fabric of Egyptian

history. For example, in the rock face of El Kanais, 55 kilometres east of the Edfu in the Wadi Mia and located near a temple founded by the nineteenth pharaoh Seti I (fl. C. 1294–1279 BCE), scholars have been able to trace three thousand years of graffiti carving which includes Greek letters, Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions and Arabic and French expressions. Over the centuries, there was a mixture of style, language and content, as there was with the graffiti found in Cairo in 2011.<sup>30</sup>

Graffiti artists in the second decade of the twenty-first century often look back to this rich lineage and incorporate traditional images and styles that speak to the current situation in Cairo. For example, Alaa Awad, an accomplished artist and instructor in mural painting in Luxor's Faculty of Fine Arts, painted (with Abu Bakr and Hanaa El Deighem) a graffiti mural for those who died in the Port Said massacre in February of 2012 (Figure 7; see p. 260 below for more on the Port Said massacre). According to Awad, the mural depicts present-day female revolutionaries in an 'ancient Egypt style' confronting Mubarak; the painting was a way to celebrate and recognise women in the current revolution and emphasise their vital place in Egyptian political culture. Awad depicted some of the women nude; in rejecting the Whahabi style of Islam he stated: 'Egypt has a long, long history and its own traditions.' Awad believes that this tradition—both in traditional art and graffiti—informs the present day revolution.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 7: A detail of the mural on Mohamed Mahmoud Street

Photo: *Revolution Graffiti—Street Art of the New Egypt* <<http://artforum.com/words/id=30394>>

From 25 January through to 11 February, Tahrir Square was filled with men, women and children demanding the ousting of Hosni Mubarak. ‘The revolutions claimed the streets, resisting the police/military and saturating spaces with a collective effervescence to challenge “business as usual”.’<sup>32</sup> These physical spaces were saturated with words as well as bodies. As the people dug in and erected tents, they also pulled out markers and spray cans to present, according to Mersal, ‘a different sense of community and solidarity’ in Tahrir Square as the walls and vehicles became a *tabla* for communication.<sup>33</sup> The varied messages allowed the occupiers to show their many frustrations and facilitate community identities and relationships.

The graffiti on these walls are relentlessly wordy, with messages and sentences scrawled in both Arabic and English (Figures 8–10). It is a collective history, a language-centered (fractured) missive that appropriates the street. As Dovey, Wollan and Woodcock assert: ‘Graffiti, like the sense of place, is deeply ingrained without being deeply rooted as essence.’<sup>34</sup> The graffiti is ephemeral and yet the sheer ubiquity of the writing allows for a ‘taking of place’ with its declarative presence. There is not an evolution or devolution of graffiti when examining the different graffiti styles—writers like Ayman and Mahmoud Aly fluidly move from tags and pieces to blatant wordy political messaging—but a specific form of writing that matches the intensity and need of the particular historical moment.

Just as the crowds forming and reforming as individuals flowed in to or were forced out of Tahrir Square created dynamic assemblages of revolutionary protest, reading the graffiti left behind creates new assemblages of the visual protest on the walls. Ganzeer drew a tank pointing a turret at a bicyclist to articulate the overwhelming firepower that the protesters were facing; in Tahrir Square the actual tanks were rearticulated not as weapons of war but as rhetorical spaces of resistance. When army tanks surrounding Tahrir Square became blank spaces for the community to write upon, new territories of materialist protest were formed; the graffiti became a visual representation of ‘the people’s voice’ to the collective body occupying the square.<sup>35</sup> This inscribing was not just a semiotic exercise, or a harmless stunt. Numerous Coptic Christians lost their lives when similar tanks crushed them to death; the turrets, after all, were loaded with live ammunition. This graffiti was an affirmation of revolutionary desire in the face of death.





Figure 8: Graffiti on a building in Tahrir Square. Arabic graffiti reads 'Failed Trick'; 'Hey you traitors Mubarak and Suleiman you will fall'; 'A public trial of the traitors' and 'no to corruption' (trans. Youness Mountaki)

Photo: Izzarian <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/8661413@N02/5444236349/>>



Figure 9: Graffiti on a building in Tahrir Square. Arabic graffiti reads, 'The Square is saying the truth'; 'to the unjust always no' (trans. Youness Mountaki)

Photo: Darla Hueske <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sierragoddess/6779134162/>>



Figure 10: Graffiti on a Building in Tahrir Square. Arabic graffiti reads, 'the revolution is in process' (trans. Youness Mountaki)

Photo: Hossam el-Hamalawy <[http://farm7.staticflickr.com/6230/6407280477\\_cbe2e44a5a.jpg](http://farm7.staticflickr.com/6230/6407280477_cbe2e44a5a.jpg)>





Figure 11: Arabic graffiti reads 'no to Mubarak and Suleiman' (trans. Youness Mountaki)

Photo: Rowan El Shimi <<http://rowanelshimi.wordpress.com/?s=tank>>

In Figure 11, the military tank meant to control the occupants of Tahrir Square is transformed into a blank slate to express individual desire for a collective audience. During the eighteen days, therefore, the interrelations between occupying public space and revolutionary writing were physically manifested. The walls spoke and they did so polyphonically.

#### —GRAFFITI'S ELASTICITY IN CAIRO

After those eighteen days, though, the walls began speaking in even more varied dialects. As the active wave of revolutionary protest receded, the impassioned, wordy graffiti, although certainly still present, gave way to more elaborate pieces such as Ganzeer's *Tank vs. Bike*. These varied forms allowed activists to use graffiti as one of many means to express their political sentiments. For example, Ganzeer, which means 'chain', takes objection with being labelled a 'graffiti writer' or 'street artist' seeing graffiti as only one aspect of his hybrid art philosophy. His blog states clearly in both English and Arabic, 'I am not a street artist or graffiti artist' and he has told interviewers, 'I react to certain things and events in different ways. For instance, some thoughts prompt me to think of organizing a flash mob, other times a questionnaire. Other things go on the internet, not through art on the street.'<sup>36</sup> Ganzeer, like other artists who found spray paint an obvious tool to communicate political messages and unrest during the demonstrations, does desire to be exclusively connected to, or gain fame within, the graffiti subculture. Unlike Mohammed Graffiti who has educated himself with graffiti history, Ganzeer does not seemingly have any preference to the form of his political art.



Figure 12. Image from Ganzeer's blog; Arabic reads, 'Violent Graffiti Week' (trans. Youness Mountaki)

Courtesy: Ganzeer <<http://ganzeer.blogspot.com/2011/12/mad-graffiti-week-jan-13-25-appeal-to.html>>

Ganzeer is using graffiti as part of what Robin Wright has labelled a 'counter-jihad' movement whose 'terroristic' violence is about bombing walls instead of enemies. This is explicitly seen in 'Mad Graffiti Week', an initiative he co-organised, designed to raise awareness of perceived injustices by SCAF by creating a DIY graffiti campaign offering a materialist protest (Figure 12).

Ganzeer has combined this 'lo-tech' form of resistance with a sophisticated online presence and activism to extend the revolutionary moment in Egypt. Yussef El Guindi, a contemporary Egyptian playwright examining youth culture, has said 'The main arena for the jihad today is culture—not combat' and Ganzeer, like other 'de facto cultural operators' is fighting with sophisticated savvy.<sup>37</sup> While Guindi's point is well taken, the cultural fight by these graffiti writers and artists—bombing walls with paint instead of bombs—still implies a type of aggressive combat. Although translated as 'Mad Graffiti Week' in English, the Arabic on the poster could

also be translated as 'Violent Graffiti Week'. This translation certainly works with the imagery in the poster; the graffiti writers are a type of warrior (with spray paint as their weapon) fighting against baton-wielding army regulars. As with most of Ganzeer's work, however, the image and the translation is layered in various reading practices. Ganzeer explained in an email to me, 'The word "violent" in Egyptian Arabic slang, though, is often used as "Much" or "a lot" or "intense", or all of those things at the same time.' While violence is certainly a part of the imagery, he continued, 'I don't obsess about translations being literal as much as its important for me that they better convey the meaning and mood behind the words instead.'<sup>38</sup> Consistently the (earnest) trickster, Ganzeer, who is fluent in both English and Arabic, would not reveal what the meaning and mood was that he was conveying; it was up to the readers of the graffiti to decide.

As graffiti moves away from the impulsiveness found during those eighteen days of protest and develops into more recognisable art forms, its ability to continue as a rupturing tool for the revolution could become diluted. One of the most recognisable of the art collectives to emerge in Cairo after the demise of Mubarak was The Freedom Painters. This group was formed on 26 February 2011 when four male and four female college students 'decided to start a project that would deliver [their] points of view to every ordinary citizen walking by the street'. The collective started as a Facebook-organised event where twenty people met at a wall and wrote inspirational messages such as 'vote' and 'don't litter' and painted murals. Following that success, the eight self-appointed administrators continued organising events and awarding certain people wall space. They would supply the paint from donations and 'allow' others to do an outline that was then filled in by community members. Noha Ahmed, one of The Freedom Painter's administrators, noted that graffiti was a 'trend in the Arab Spring' and they felt that their work was 'the start of a new graffiti—a revolutionary one'.<sup>39</sup>

This idealism around the effectiveness of public murals is evident both in the answers Ahmed gives about the genesis of The Freedom Painters as well as the paintings. For example, Khaled, a dentistry student and avid member of the group, painted a picture of an Egyptian with a flag under her eye and the words (in English) 'Egyptian and Proud' (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Khaled from The Freedom Painters, *Egyptian and Proud*

Photo: Courtesy Noha Ahmed.

But although Ahmed believes that this art movement is a ‘new graffiti’ it is certainly reminiscent of other large public art and graffiti campaigns, especially the successful graffiti arts programs established in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s—Graffiti Alternatives Workshop (GAW) being the most famous—that used community-led workshops and non-professionals to paint walls. Like these groups that wanted an art to reflect their particular subjective experience, after the Tahrir Square demonstrations The Freedom Painters wanted a public arts project where they could directly connect with each other and the community on the basis of being Egyptian.

There is, however, a distinct ideological divide between the murals done by The Freedom Painters and the pieces done by Ganzeer. Although The Freedom Painters’ murals have been self-described as graffiti and the press coverage have also labelled it this way, the group—unlike the other writers mentioned here—wants to work within a legal framework. As of March 2012, the group has placed itself on hiatus because they have not been able to acquire funds for their paint and because ‘painting on a wall should be by permission from the land owner’. When further questioned about walls being part of the public domain, the group replied, ‘it’s true that the wall is a public wall, but with us, it’s not okay for anyone to draw anything’ because this was a communal group and all members were associated with it.<sup>40</sup> This view is a striking ideological break from those of other graffiti writers, who, in their resistance to authority, want to break laws rather than work within them.

Immediately after Mubarak stepped down, there was a 'war on graffiti' against anti-SCAF pieces.<sup>41</sup> The Freedom Painters, and other muralists who wish to work within the realm of the nation state, therefore, must produce pieces that do not disturb the power balance of those in authority. When they do, as graffiti writers Ali al-Halabi, Ahmad Samhan, Janzir, Ganzeer and others have discovered, they can be detained by the military police for harsh questioning.<sup>42</sup> The writers scrawling 'Down with Mubarak' on Tahrir Square's walls or Ganzeer offering ways to mass produce DIY anti-SCAF stencils on his website are attempting to disrupt the loci of state power; artists working within the law must appease both the viewer on the street and governmental overseer of the wall. As Dovey et al. state: 'While vandalism transgresses the law, art frames a range of discursive transgressions.'<sup>43</sup> A desire to work within a legal framework is one reason sanctioned public art is often intimately intertwined with the machinations of state apparatus.<sup>44</sup> This is clear in Kaled's nationalist-inspired graffiti. The art might be beautiful, but legally sanctioned murals can become a key component of solidifying state power.

Dismissing this type of 'legal' graffiti in Adelaide, South Australia, Hasley and Pederick see a connection to vandalism as an inherent component or function of graffiti:

in order to engage—in order to be a player at the table of bureaucracy (urban and community planning)—graffiti must function as its own form of erasure. Its forms and contents can be muralized, stylized, sanitized—even problematized—but the resulting script must not be synonymous with graffiti. The city as property owner, policeman, prison guard, collector and curator can ingest or make room for all types of expression—but graffiti, in its spontaneous and ever-changing form—is not one of these.<sup>45</sup>

Hasley and Pederick are writing about a 'stable' city in Australia that, unlike Cairo, is not in the midst of political and social upheaval, but the quote relates to the way political graffiti in the form of sanctioned art loses vitality and consequentially performs its own ideological erasure that can be as complete as a swath of white paint. While 'edgy' art is always a viable commodity that can be 'sold' in a variety of ways in late capitalistic societies, graffiti, which is raw and opportunistic, cannot. Comparing illegal graffiti to sanctioned street art, Dovey et al. state, 'tagging is linked

to dereliction and abjection, [whereas] street art can be a key dimension of gentrification'.<sup>46</sup> Although Cairo is far from being gentrified at its present moment of disruption, legalised street art acts to blunt resistive discourse.

The reappropriation of resistive cultural practices is certainly not new to the graffiti subculture; what is fascinating is the speed in which attempts have been made to cannibalise and delimit resistive graffiti. Multinational corporations such as Cherokee, Coca-Cola, Pepsi and Mobinil have all used graffiti-style advertisements in post-revolution Cairo to market their brands that sell, at best, subcultural 'cool' and, at worst, attempt to convert revolutionary impulses into commodity fetishism.<sup>47</sup> Cherokee's call to 'live your life' in a time of revolution by driving in a car that is named after a subjected tribe of Native Americans is a perfect example of the reaches of neoliberal, geopolitical capitalism (Figure 14).

Art galleries have also capitalised on graffiti's cultural capital with the Townhouse Gallery and the Articulate Baboon Gallery, among others in Cairo, having 'street art' exhibitions. The revolutionary graffiti that was born on the streets is being dislocated and placed within the walls of art museums offering sanctioned, commercial assemblages. This repurposing of graffiti certainly does something different from the graffiti found in (and subsequently erased from) Tahrir Square. This tension was at the heart of the 18 September 2011 exhibition at the Townhouse Gallery cheekily entitled, 'This is Not Graffiti' (Figure 15).

The exhibit self-consciously raised issues about whether or not graffiti is profoundly changed when placed in a confined, regulated space. As Soraya Morayef, a freelance journalist and blogger who has been tirelessly chronicling the evolving graffiti scene in Cairo, wrote in her blog:

When I developed this concept [for the show], I received a lot of flak for commercialising/bastardising/ mainstreaming an underground art scene that belonged to the street. While I don't completely subscribe to this puritanical belief, I wanted to bring graffiti artists inside and see if audiences would still come to see their work.<sup>48</sup>

The crowds did come and the reaction, as could be expected, was mixed. The wide gulf between the dichotomous worlds of 'graffiti as vandalism' and 'graffiti as art' has been argued over in the United States ever since Warhol befriended Basquiat. In the raw aftermath of the post-Mubarak era, this divide is even more pertinent and



Figure 14: Arabic reads, 'Win 30 Cherokee cars'; 'Live your life and win Cherokee' (trans. Youness Mountaki)

Photo: courtesy Soraya Morayef <<http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2011/08/15/graffiti-war-the-street-versus-pepsi/>>



Figure 15: Poster for 'This Is Not Graffiti' exhibit at the Townhouse Gallery, 18 September 2011

troubled. The tenuous tripartite relationship between graffiti, the revolutionary impulse and the city landscape is constantly being reterritorialised and, as the transition from Mubarak rule to the Morsi presidency to the interim army-led government proceeds, the future forms of graffiti in Cairo are unknown. As Cairo rebuilds its identity, though, the city seems to be able to contain multiplicities—with graffiti still offering new apertures for resistive cultural practices.

In concluding this article, let me highlight two moments in the post-Mubarak transition that demonstrate how graffiti can transgress laws while aesthetically creating new city spaces. Both focus on one street in Cairo—Mohammed Mahmoud Street—and on the way graffiti is intertwined with the revolutionary impulse. This street is a main artery into Tahrir Square and a strategic location where both protesters and police forces congregate. When crowds form in Tahrir Square, it is often on this street where the riot police assemble; it is also the street where protesters meet (or regroup) before heading en masse to protest at the Ministry of Interior. Morayef, who has been observing this street for years, has described Mohammed Mahmoud Street as feeling like ‘a graveyard of the revolution’ and in many posts has detailed the violence that has transformed this once bustling street into an often contested battleground.<sup>49</sup> In this final section, I focus on two moments where the protests in the street and the protests on the walls have become intimately intertwined—the Port Said massacre and the ‘No Walls’ campaign.<sup>50</sup>

—MOHAMMED MAHMOUD STREET AND THE ‘NO WALLS’ CAMPAIGN

On 1 February 2012, in the moments immediately following a football match in Port Said between Cairo club Al-Ahly and local club Al-Masry, thousands of Cairo fans swarmed onto the pitch. The celebration, however, turned quickly violent, resulting in seventy-four people dead and over a thousand injured. There was a noticeable lack of police presence at the match and the tragedy was deemed political, with some suggesting it resulted from anti-SCAF chants by the Al-Ahly’s fans at a previous game. When news of the event spread, men and women took to the streets and downtown Cairo was once again a scene of massive protests. Many of the streets leading to Tahrir Square and the Ministry of the Interior were barricaded and streets throughout the city became the front line between soldiers and protesters with Mohammed Mahmoud Street the loci of the most intense violence.<sup>51</sup> On the



night after the Port Said carnage, as thousands of protesters swarmed the streets and the air was filled with tear gas, graffiti writers took to the walls to paint murals of those that had lost their lives. Ammar Abo-Bakr, when he was not throwing rocks at the army or arguing with Islamists who questioned the revolutionary worth of graffiti and protests, painted walls throughout the night. As Morayef described them, Abo-Bakr and his colleagues were ‘demonstrating artists, or artistic demonstrators’.<sup>52</sup> For these writers, graffiti was part of the battlefield and the interrelationship between the throwing of rocks and the placing of paint on walls were different manifestations of the same revolutionary impulse. Unlike the murals by The Freedom Painters, these were illegal and spontaneous.

In one particular section of the wall, there is a mural of a victim of the Port Said violence, a crescent and a cross, as well as some quickly drawn tags (Figure 16). On close inspection, we can see sprayed on the electricity box in front of the wall the words ‘No SCAF’, hastily written words and other smaller scratches and tags. This graffiti, presumably by different people, is overlaid on previously painted graffiti that was not completely erased; in one section of the wall, the ghostly words bleed through the green paint.



Figure 16: Arabic graffiti reads, ‘we either take revenge for them or die like them’; ‘mother of’; ‘no to the army’ (trans. Youness Mountaki)

Photo: courtesy Soraya Morayef <<http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2012/02/08/in-the-midst-of-madness-graffiti-of-the-ultras-on-mohamed-mahmoud-street/>>

It is a dialogue, a palimpsest of angry and violent conversations where the victims of the Port Said violence are allocated a temporary physical space in the collective memory of the city. Murals and tags share the same urban space, creating revolutionary assemblages. These messages are multilayered and interrupt each other—and in some cases, erase parts of each other—but the overall assemblage of text and image create a graffiti that speaks as vividly as a hand releasing a rock. As Abo-Bakr states: 'We react to the pulse on the street. We have nothing to do with any party or movement. Nor is anyone paying for this art. We don't care if it's erased. The street is in a confrontation with the Minister of Interior and we're with the street.'<sup>53</sup> The graffiti found on Mohammed Mahmoud Street—and throughout Cairo—details this lack of political rigidity: anarchist symbols are placed near passages of the Koran, the Twitter logo with the phrase 'The Revolution will not be Tweeted' is stencilled in English near murals depicting classic Egyptian Pharaonic figures, the faces of female rape victims are seen near the images of the murdered Coptic Christians. As some graffiti is whitewashed, new ones emerge. The street—the city itself—has become alive and, in the view of this graffiti writer, is an essential participant in the revolutionary process. Through graffiti, Sassen's theoretical global street has become a lived reality.

In a response to this contested violence with the state, SCAF officials attempted to control Mohammed Mahmoud Street, thereby limiting the future flow of bodies into Tahrir Square. The government has tried to seal off the square by placing large blockades on the streets that feed into Mohammed Mahmoud Street. These blockades consist of square concrete blocks placed on top of each other to create what journalist Bradley Hope has called a 'military zone' and others have compared to smaller incarnations of the Berlin Wall.<sup>54</sup> Unsurprisingly, these blockades have been sites of violence and they, too, are covered with graffiti. But while graffiti on the walls of Mohamed Mahmoud Street have been used to call attention to those who have died violent deaths in the months after Mubarak stepped down, graffiti writers have made these new walls disappear.

In February of 2012, a 'No Walls' campaign began as writers attempted to transform the walls from blockades to passages, painting landscape scenes to 're-open' them by making the walls invisible.<sup>55</sup> These wall murals artistically replicate the street itself, with one on Yousef al-Guindy Street dissolving the wall, artistically



Figure 17: Mural on Yousef al-Guindy Street

Photo: Soraya Morayef <<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4776/the-seven-wonders-of-the-revolution>>

opening it up to traffic and pedestrians (Figure 17). While the walls have stopped the normal function of a street, these artists here rearticulated the street to an idealised version of itself.

Other walls have images of strolling mothers with baby carriages or a peaceful ocean view; these artists are attempting to remake the city's 'militaristic' landscape into a peaceful idealised cityscape. Ibrahim Eissa, editor of *Al Tahrir*, a newspaper that has been critical of both Mubarak and Morsi, stated that the 'politics of the concrete wall' initiated by SCAF is divisive and attempts to dislocate protesters from the streets where the revolution was born.<sup>56</sup> In response, these murals are painted in such a way to ideologically remove the walls by replacing them with wide-open spaces. In this 'counter-jihadist' rebellion, the muralists have decided to 'bomb' the walls by making them beautiful.

The aesthetic nature of the project brings into question what this type of mural does to the revolutionary process in Cairo, a similar set of questions to those raised by the *This Is Not Graffiti* exhibition. For example, when Banksy, the famous British graffiti provocateur, painted the Segregation Wall in Palestine, an older resident told him to stop because: 'We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall.'<sup>57</sup> The old man did not want the wall to become a canvas for art, he wanted the wall to be destroyed. The same Deleuzean question of 'what does this graffiti do' is being asked

of these writers in Egypt as the graffiti on the walls becomes more stylistically complex, leading to a variety of responses and aesthetic reactions. Is there a moment, a tipping point, when the walls will become solely art works, shorn of their revolutionary message? Do the pieces become more associated with the graffiti writers (as was the case for Banksy) than for the protest that inspired them?

Because these walls were collectively painted and there is not one artist being singled out, it is highly unlikely that this will happen. In addition, unlike Banksy's pieces on the Segregation Wall, which were highly ironic, the 'No Walls' murals have an earnest feel to them, pointing to a new city emerging from the revolutionary fight taking place in the streets. For example, if we examine the mural on Sheikh Rihan Street at two different stages of creation, we can see how the mural, while reflecting an idealised view of the city, also contains its violent history. On 12 March 2012, Mosa'ab Elshamy snapped a photo of the wall (Figure 18).

The mural is creatively and expertly painted so that it blends into the American University of Cairo on one side and green-leafed trees on the other. In this photo, the image of the street is peaceful; the street seemingly never ends. While the actual street is filled with litter and a faded crosswalk, within the mural the water on the street reflects palm trees and a peaceful sky. But the completed mural inserts a graphic history of the street (Figure 19).



Figure 18: Mural painted on stone barricade, Sheikh Rihan Street, March 2012

Photo: Mosa'ab Elshamy

<<http://www.flickr.com/photos/mosaaberising/6977793211/in/photostream>>



Figure 19: Mural painted on stone barricade, Sheikh Riham Street, March 2012

Photo: Soraya Morayef <[http://www.jadaliyya.com/content\\_images/fck\\_images/jad11.jpeg](http://www.jadaliyya.com/content_images/fck_images/jad11.jpeg)>

The conflict between protesters and police is relived, expertly painted into the background of the mural. Unlike the framed portraits seen on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, on these walls no particular martyrs are memorialised; the protesters are faceless and somewhat ghostlike as they drift through the haze of swinging batons and smoke. In the forefront, a boy on a bicycle is watching the violence as a man attempts to save books burning in the Institut d'Egypte—a tragedy where over two hundred thousand rare and ancient books were destroyed or badly damaged when a fire completely razed the building.<sup>58</sup> These photos show the wall at two different moments of creation but when we examine the finished mural, we see assembled two main thrusts of revolutionary desire—a remembrance of the violent spectral past and the hope for an idyllic, peaceful street in the future.

The graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street and on blockades for the 'No Walls' campaign were illegal and could have (and, in some cases, did) lead to physical violence against the writers because of their resistive practices. They were not given permission, but, like decades of graffiti writers before this historic revolutionary moment, they decided to take their place on the wall. In both these instances, graffiti has been used for revolutionary purposes that have recreated the street and given Cairo's protesters rhetorical as well as seriatim openings where new forms of the



Figure 20: Protesters tearing down the Qasr Al Ainy Wall. Arabic reads [incomplete] 'the British museum' (trans. Youness Mountaki)

Photo: Lilian Wagdy <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/lilianwagdy/6884317008/in/set-72157629339539378>>

political and social are always in a state of becoming. Graffiti, of course, does not act alone. It participates in collaboration with a constellation of resistances—while some artists have chosen to make the walls beautiful, as in Figure 20, others have decided to physically tear them down. Both, though, are attempts to render the city landscape in a way that supports varied revolutionary aims.

#### —WHAT'S NEXT?

When examining the walls of Cairo—from pre-revolution, during the eighteen-day uprising, and through the SCAF controlled government until the elections of Morsi on 30 June 2012—it is apparent that a revolution did take place in Egypt. But the revolution and the city landscape are in a sustained moment of flux and the future is unwritten. During Morsi's time in office as well as after his ousting, graffiti has been a conduit for layered, complicated and site-specific conversations, followed and analysed by a diverse group of people from within Egypt and around the world. During Morsi's shortened presidency, graffiti was seen as a threat and writers could be arrested for their crimes; words and images, though, continued to appear on Cairo's streets. After Morsi was deposed and arrested, and the army, headed by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, controlled the government, graffiti persisted as a voice of popular uprisings, with writers from opposite sides of the ideological gulf writing

on the walls. Much of the graffiti discussed in this article have been from liberal secularists, but Islamists have also used graffiti, most noticeably after the violent suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood and its followers. This sectarian oppression during the first seven weeks of the army's control has been severe, with at least three documented mass shootings at pro-Morsi protests resulting in over one thousand Egyptians dying and scores more being injured. Concurrently, there has been large number of arrests and death sentences of Muslim Brotherhood members and pro-Morsi allies.

The protests and graffiti writing, however, have persisted in spite of the suppression. On 13 August 2013, graffiti was spray painted on the Nahdat Misr statue, in Nahda Square in the Giza region. The statue, near Cairo University, celebrates the cultural 'renaissance' that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Egypt (and throughout MENA) that inaugurated a period of cultural and political reform. The sculptor, Mahmoud Mukhtar, was commissioned to commemorate the Revolution of 1919 and, with much fanfare, he created *Nahdat Misr: Le Reveil de L'Egypte* (Figure 21).

The statue is of a peasant Egyptian woman calling upon the Sphinx to arise from his prostration, signalling a new Egypt whose history would help write its future. It was completed in 1928 using private and public funds, and was intended for both the Egyptian people and, because of its location, for foreign consumption. It was to help advertise the renaissance in Egyptian arts and politics to a global audience. The statue, according to Prime Minister al-Nahhas who spoke at its unveiling, 'represents the glory of the past, the earnestness of the present, and the hope of the future'.<sup>59</sup>

That future's direction is very much in doubt in 2014. So is its past, as the statue and the 'renaissance' itself has been a site of much political debate. Nahda is not a word with fixed politics and it is used to mobilise political agendas that revive the past, whether Pharonic or Islamic. For example, Khairat Al-Shater, the Deputy Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, titled his lecture on 21 April 2011, 'Features of Nahda: Gains of the Revolution and the Horizons for Developing'. In it he refers to non-Islamists as pre-Islamic; reclaiming the culture in the name of El Nahda plays on the way Pharaonism was used to forge a new nationalism in modern Egypt, underwriting the Muslim Brotherhood's legitimacy.<sup>60</sup>





Figure 21: Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Nahdat Misr: Le Reveil de L'Egypte* (Egypt's Renaissance), 1928

Source: <[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e7/Nahdet\\_Misr.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e7/Nahdet_Misr.jpg)>



Figure 22. Graffiti on *Nahdat Misr* in Arabic reads, 'Islamic Rule'; 'Islamic Egypt'. On its base, the writer declares, 'Thugs + Christians = Tamarod' (trans. Betsy Hiel)

Photo: Betsy Hiel. "<[https://twitter.com/betsy\\_hiel/status/367292821474000897/photo/1](https://twitter.com/betsy_hiel/status/367292821474000897/photo/1)>



This belief in the Muslim Brotherhood's rightfulness is clear when reading the graffiti on the statue which states in Arabic, 'Islamic Rule', 'Islamic Egypt'. On its base, the writer has declared, 'Thugs + Christians = Tamarod' (Figure 22). Although graffiti has been seen as a tool of secular revolutionaries, in this case it is the Islamists using the medium to make their feelings known, spray painting their beliefs as they occupied the area around the statue, chanting for a reinstatement of Morsi. The inflammatory rhetoric on the defaced statue's base that equates all Christians with the Tamarod (a grassroots organisation formed to oppose Morsi) speaks to the layered tensions and bubbling violence in the present moment, but the roots of which dig into previous eras. The ephemerality of the graffiti on the seemingly permanent stone statue is striking; contemporary conversations dripped in blood are being written over Egyptian historic symbols. Will the writing be cleansed from the statue, quickly forgotten as a post-Muslim Brotherhood era begins? Or will this writing infuse with historic symbolism to create a 'new renaissance' of Islamist rule in Egypt?

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Joe Austin writes, 'A revolution that does not allow the citizens to write on the city walls can be no revolution at all.'<sup>61</sup> Revolutions, though, happen organically and without a unified centre; as the images discussed throughout this article attest, the revolution has many actors and numerous dialects. At the time of writing, it is unsure how the revolution started in 2011 will evolve, although graffiti is one way to continue to monitor the process. Did the graffiti sprayed upon the Christian homes in Al Nazla by pro-Morsi factions on 30 June 2013 mark these buildings for future violence?<sup>62</sup> How will radical groups, such as the Black Boc, a shadowy anarchist collective that emerged during protests in the first weeks of 2013, use graffiti as they attempt to disrupt the political process in Egypt?<sup>63</sup> Will graffiti practitioners like Ganzeer, Sad Panda and Keizer change their styles as more international attention is focused on their work?<sup>64</sup> How will the Egyptian military, who are fighting graffiti writers from both sides of the political divide, react to the evolving narrative being written on the walls? While the situation is still in a state of Deleuzian becoming, if Saskia Sassen is correct and a new 'global street' was born from the Arab Spring and thus a new Cairo, this much is known: the walls of the new

city will continue to have paint on them. And the residents of the city—and unknown numbers of people around the world—will continue to read them.

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#### —NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Soraya Morayef, 'War on Graffiti—SCAF Loyalists versus Graffiti Artists', *Suzeeinthecity*, <<https://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2012/02/06/war-on-graffiti-scaf-vandalists-versus-graffiti-artists/>>. Morayef, a freelance writer, blogger and Cairo resident, has been following the graffiti scene since the onset of the Arab Spring and her blog is an excellent narrative of the evolving graffiti movement in Egypt.

<sup>2</sup> Saskia Sassen, 'The Global Street: Making the Political', *Globalizations* vol. 8, no. 5, 2011, p. 579.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of various analyses of specific conflict graffiti, see, for example, Matt Kenard, 'Global Art Uprising: How the Revolutionary Spirit Transformed Creativity', *The Comment Factory*, <<http://www.thecommentfactory.com/the-global-art-uprising-how-the-revolutionary-spirit-transformed-creativity-6220/>>; Frederick Baker, 'The Red Army Graffiti in the Reichstag, Berlin: Politics of Rock-art in a Contemporary European Urban Landscape' in *European Landscapes of Rock-Art*,

eds Christopher Chinpendale and George Nash, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 20–38; Ella Chmielewska, 'Framing [Con] text Graffiti and Place', *Space and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007, pp. 145–69.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of graffiti in Tunisia, see 'The Revolutionary Art: Street Art Before and After the Tunisian Revolution', *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection Paper 1134*, <[http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/1134](http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1134)>. For an account of Gaddafi's last hours with photographs of the graffiti covered tunnel where he was killed, see Ben Farmer, 'Gaddafi's Final Hours: Nato and the SAS Helped Rebels Drive Hunted Leader into Endgame in a Desert Drain,' *Telegraph*, 22 October 2011, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8843684/Gaddafis-final-hours-Nato-and-the-SAS-helped-rebels-drive-hunted-leader-into-endgame-in-a-desert-drain.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> Kim Dovey, Simon Wollan and Ian Woodcock, 'Placing Graffiti: Creating and Contesting Character in Inner-city Melbourne', *Journal of Urban Design*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2012, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Ferrell, *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1996, p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> I have not, however, seen the graffiti that I am examining in this article on Cairo's walls. I have not traced my fingers along the layers of paint, nor toed the remains of the spent cans littered besides the writing. As a graffiti scholar based in the United States, I have not had the opportunity to analyse Cairo's graffiti first hand. I am conscious of potential biases when examining a city that has a wonderfully rich and historic graffiti lineage and my intention is not to employ a Western-based paradigm for readings of Cairo's graffiti. I am not reading this graffiti in terms of specific political parties or attempting to make universalising claims about its meaning; I understand that being an outsider precludes me from understanding many of the nuances of the graffiti that one encounters when examining the numerous images that are readily available through Web searches.

<sup>8</sup> In graffiti subcultures, there is much debate over the terms writer/artist and graffiti/street art. Some see graffiti as exclusively in the realm of destruction, an occupation of space by writing on walls. Others see walls as merely a canvas for their artwork. While this debate is an important one and is not just a case of semantics as it deals with identity politics and ideological positioning, due to the fluid nature of the graffiti scene(s) forming and reforming in Egypt at this historical moment, I am for the most part collapsing the terms—although in a larger panoramic project of Egyptian graffiti, a more careful unravelling of these terms will be needed.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the revolution and social media, see Michael Doran's, 'The Impact of New Media: The Revolution will be Tweeted' in *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, eds Keneth Pollack et al., Brookings Institute Press, Washington, DC, 2011, pp. 39–46.

<sup>10</sup> Mona Abaza, 'Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2013, pp. 122–39.

- <sup>11</sup> Shadi Hamid, 'Egypt—The Prize' in *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, eds Kenneth Pollack et al., Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2011, pp. 102–3.
- <sup>12</sup> Robin Wright, *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2012, pp. 21–4.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 23.
- <sup>14</sup> Chmielewska, p. 163.
- <sup>15</sup> Bruno David and Meredith Wilson, 'Spaces of Resistance: Graffiti and Indigenous Place Markings in the Early European Contact Period of Northern Australia' in *Inscribed Landscapes: Marketing and Making Place*, University of Hawaii Press, Hawaii, 2002, pp. 42–4.
- <sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Sage Publications Limited, New York, 1993, p. 80.
- <sup>17</sup> Wael Salah Fahmi, "'Bloggers" Street Movement and the Right to the City: (Re) claiming Cairo's Real and Virtual Spaces of Freedom', *Environment and Urbanization*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2009, p. 99.
- <sup>18</sup> Mark Halsey and Ben Pederick, 'The Game of Fame: Mural, Graffiti, Erasure', *City*, vol. 14, no. 1–2, 2010, p. 93.
- <sup>19</sup> Iman Mersel, 'Revolutionary Humor', *Globalizations*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2011, p. 672.
- <sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Burns & Oates, London, 1987, p. 257.
- <sup>21</sup> Chmielewska, p. 148.
- <sup>22</sup> For a concise reading of 'assemblage', see J. Macgregor Wise, 'Assemblage' in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, eds O. Stivale and Charles Stivale, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2005, pp. 77–87.
- <sup>23</sup> Both writers are famous in the graffiti scene. For examples of their work, see <<http://cope2.net/blogzilla/>> and <<http://www.canttwo.de/>>.
- <sup>24</sup> Mahmoud Graffiti, interview by John Lennon, *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 25, 2012, <<http://rhizomes.net/current/index.html>>.
- <sup>25</sup> Jeff Ferrell and Robert D. Weide, 'Spot Theory', *City*, vol. 14, no. 1–2, 2010, p. 53.
- <sup>26</sup> Joe Austin, 'More to See than a Canvas in a White Cube: For an Art in the Streets', *City*, vol. 14, no. 1–2, 2010, p. 44.
- <sup>27</sup> For a description of the city streets during Mubarak's rule as well as organised movements to clean the streets after the Arab Spring, see Jessica Weinagar, 'Taking out the Trash: Youth Clean Up Egypt after Mubarak' in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt*, eds Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing, Verso Books, London, 2012, pp. 64–73.
- <sup>28</sup> Yasmine El Rashidi, 'Art or Vandalism?', *Index on Censorship*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2011, pp. 78–88, <<http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2011-09-27-elrashidi-en.pdf>>.
- <sup>29</sup> Mersal, p. 672.
- <sup>30</sup> Rachel Mairs, '8 Egyptian "Inscriptions" and Greek "Graffiti" at El Kanais in the Egyptian Eastern Desert' in *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, eds Jennifer Bairand and Calire Taylor, Routledge, New York, 2010, pp. 153–64.

- <sup>31</sup> 'Alaa Awad', *Art Forum*, 27 February 2012, <<http://artforum.com/words/id=30394>>. The connection between the current graffiti scene(s) in Egypt and its long historical tradition is explicit. Although somewhat outside the purview of this article, it plays an important role in cultural reading practices of the graffiti found in the post-Mubarak era. There are many texts that discuss this link including Ben Wittner, Sascha Thoma and Nicolas Bourquin, *Arabesque: Graphic Design from the Arab World and Persia*, Gestalten Verlag, Berlin, 2008, and Don Stone Karl's *Arabic Graffiti, From Here to Fame*, Berlin, 2011, as well as his crowd-sourced projected book *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution*.
- <sup>32</sup> Anna M. Agathangelou and Nevzat Soguk, 'Rocking the Kasbah: Insurrectional Politics, the "Arab Streets", and Global Revolution in the 21st Century', *Globalizations*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2011, p. 552.
- <sup>33</sup> Mersal, p. 672.
- <sup>34</sup> Dovey et al., p. 38.
- <sup>35</sup> Mersal, p. 672.
- <sup>36</sup> Heba Elkayal, 'Ganzeer: The De facto Cultural Operator', *Daily News Egypt*, 27 July 2011, <<http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2011/07/27/ganzeer-the-de-facto-cultural-operator/>>.
- <sup>37</sup> Wright, p. 214; Kristen Chick, 'Egyptian Graffiti Artist Ganzeer Arrested Amid Surge in Political Expression', *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 May 2011, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0526/Egyptian-graffiti-artist-Ganzeer-arrested-amid-surge-in-political-expression>>. The quote by El Guindi might be a bit of hyperbole. In the wake of huge quantities of suicide bombings that have continued to afflict the Middle East, it is painfully clear that violent manifestations of jihad are still prevalent.
- <sup>38</sup> Mohammad Fahmi, e-mail message to author, 27 August 2013.
- <sup>39</sup> Noha Ahmed, interview by John Lennon, *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 25, 2012, <<http://rhizomes.net/current/index.html>>.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> M. Al-Khouly, 'Egypt's New Rulers Declare War On ... Graffiti', *Al-Akbar English*, 10 November 2011, <<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/1330>>.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Dovey et al., p. 22.
- <sup>44</sup> Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2008, p. 21.
- <sup>45</sup> Hasley and Pederick, p. 58.
- <sup>46</sup> Dovey et al., p. 35.
- <sup>47</sup> To see the way multinational corporations have used graffiti in their ads, see Soraya Morayef, 'Graffiti War: The Street versus Pepsi', *Suzeeinthecity*, 15 August 2011, <<http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2011/08/15/graffiti-war-the-street-versus-pepsi/>>. For a larger understanding of the way marketers have attempted to use the revolution for commercial

purposes, see Eric Westervelt's 'Graffiti Reclaims Egyptian Revolution from Marketers', *NPR: All Things Considered*, 3 July 2011, <<http://www.npr.org/2011/07/03/137402744/artists-street-artists-defend-egypts-revolutionary-imagery>>.

<sup>48</sup> Morayef, 'This is not Graffiti—Opens at Townhouse Factory Space, Cairo', *Suzeeinthecity*, 19 September 2011, <<http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2011/09/19/this-is-not-graffiti-opens-at-townhouse-factory-space-cairo/>>

<sup>49</sup> Morayef, 'In the Midst of Madness: Graffiti of the Ultras on Mohamed Mahmoud Street', *Suzeeinthecity*, 8 February 2011, <<http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2012/02/08/in-the-midst-of-madness-graffiti-of-the-ultras-on-mohamed-mahmoud-street/>>

<sup>50</sup> David Botti, 'One Street at the Centre of Cairo's Violent Clashes', *BBC News Magazine*, 23 November 2011, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-15847140>>

<sup>51</sup> On 19 November, there was an eruption of violence on this street and many protesters were killed or injured—many sustaining gunshot wounds to their eyes. Murals quickly filled the walls of the streets with images of victims who lost their eye. See Morayef, 'The Revolution Continues ... And so does the Graffiti', <<http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2011/12/03/the-revolution-continues-and-so-does-graffiti/>>. Much like the wall battle between Gazeer and Badr Battalion 1, there have been frequent clashes between pro-revolution graffiti artists and Salafist's who have erased some portraits of the revolutionaries and replaced them with Quranic verses. These were then replaced by more murals. For a description of the work, see 'Graffiti Artists Defend Work in Tahrir Square with "Quranic verses"', *Ahram Online*, 9 November 2011, <<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/57674/Egypt/Politics-/Graffiti-artists-defend-work-in-Tahrir-Square-with.aspx>>.

<sup>52</sup> Morayef, 'In the Midst of Madness'.

<sup>53</sup> Rawya Rageh, 'Graffiti Convey Stories of Egypt Revolution,' *Aljazeera*, 27 February 2012, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2012/02/2012227124328836724.html>>

<sup>54</sup> Bradley Hope, 'SCAF try to Seal off Dissent with Walls around Tahrir Square', *The National*, 21 December 2011, <<http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/scaf-try-to-seal-off-dissent-with-walls-around-tahrir-square>>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Some of the participants were Mohamed 'El Moshir' Gad, Ammar Abu Bakr, Alaa Awad, Laila Maged, among others.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Banksy, *Banksy: Wall and Piece*, Random House UK, London, 2005, p. 108.

<sup>58</sup> Malihe Razazan, 'An Interview With Paul Sedra: Another Victim of the Egyptian Junta - l'Institut d'Egypte', *Jadaliyya*, 22 December 2011, <[http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3725/an-interview-with-paul-sedra\\_another-victim-of-the](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3725/an-interview-with-paul-sedra_another-victim-of-the)>.

<sup>59</sup> Elliot Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007, pp. 229–33.

<sup>60</sup> 'Khairat al-Shater on "The Nahda Project" (Complete Translation)' Hudson Institute, 10 April 2012 <<http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/khairat-al-shater-on-the-nahda-project-complete-translation>>.

<sup>61</sup> Austin, p. 44.

<sup>62</sup> Kristen Chick, 'In Egyptian village, Christian Shops Marked Ahead of Church Attack', *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 August 2013, <<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0818/In-Egyptian-village-Christian-shops-marked-ahead-of-church-attack-video>>.

<sup>63</sup> For an introduction to the Black Boc in Egypt, see Colin Moynihan, 'A "Black Bloc" emerges in Egypt', 25 January 2013, <<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/25/a-black-bloc-emerges-in-egypt/>>.

<sup>64</sup> Keizer is an eponymous graffiti writer in Cairo whose insightful political graffiti has a wide viewership. For images of his work, see <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/keizerstreetart/>>.